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How We Grow Strawberries Every Year

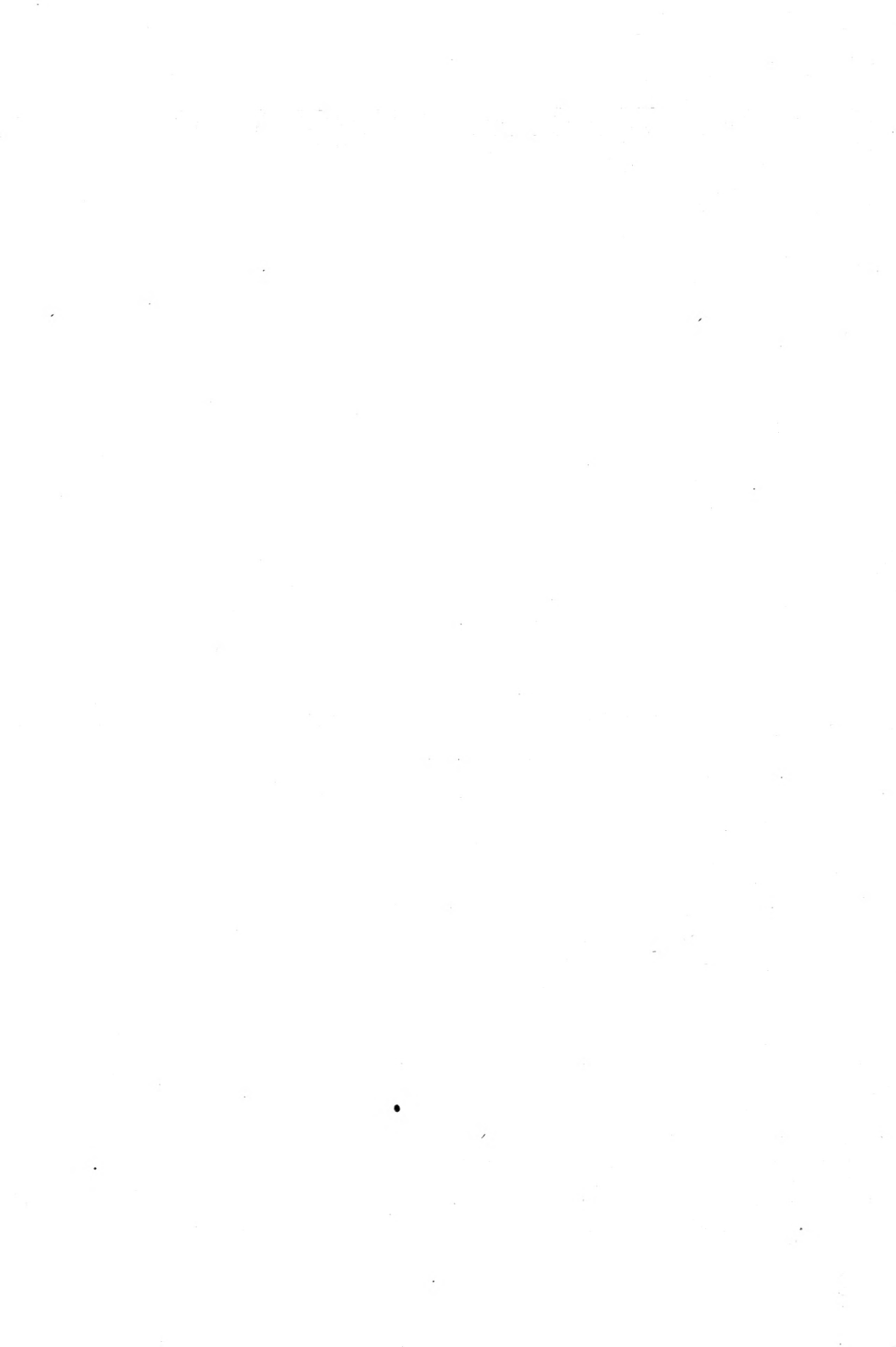
AT THE
Leverich Fruit, Seed and
Dairy Farm

J. E. Leverich



Picking the Berries

Address Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the
“Wisconsin State Horticultural Society”
at Madison, Wisconsin



Strawberries Every Year

By J. E. LEVERICH

I appear before you today at the request of our efficient Secretary, Mr. Cranefield, to explain how we grow strawberries "every year." I might say with much truth that I have partially, at least, grown up in the strawberry field. I cannot remember when we have not had at least five acre to pick each year, and for the coming season we have about fifteen acres. We are "farmer strawberry growers," but understand we look out for and plan to make a success of the berries—both strawberries and bush fruits, just the same as we do of our herd of Holstein cattle and our fields of Golden Glow and Silver King Seed Corn.

However, I am well aware that we have broken many old rules and methods brought along from the past in relation to the growing of a strawberry crop for profit, and I do not doubt but that some of the methods we follow, which, before I am through I will explain, may be a severe shock to the sensitive strawberry nerve of some strawberry growers in my audience. But as a tonic for that distressed person, I have this suggestion: Come to the "Leverich Fruit Farm" during the picking season next June and eat of the fruit and if this and the sight of one hundred pickers, picking the luscious "King of all Berries," does not restore to normal conditions the nerves which I may have upset, I shall feel that nothing but the 'old plan' will do for that person.

In giving you information on how we grow them, not one year but every year, and produce nearly 20% of all the berries grown in the Sparta district, and a crop the past season of nearly thirty-five hundred 16-quart cases from nine acres, with sales of nearly seven thousand dollars for the same—and yet we hear some people say that strawberries are run out at Sparta. There certainly is an opportunity for difference of opinion on the question.

Location

We select a suitable location which, in our particular case is a sandy loam soil with a clay sub-soil, just rolling enough to afford good natural drainage. We grow in a three year rotation, oats, corn or potatoes and strawberries. We always grow a cultivated crop the year preceding the planting of strawberries, which helps to eradicate the weeds to a large extent the following year.

Preparation of Soil

We fall plow all land to be planted to strawberries at least eight inches deep. We disc all land before plowing, which cuts up the stubbles and leaves the top of the ground in a loose condition. As soon as the snow melts off in the spring and before the ground thaws out, we top-dress, using from ten to fifteen loads per acre of barn yard manure, applied with a spreader. As soon as the ground is dry enough to work in the spring, we harrow it to break the top and thoroughly pulverize the manure. It is next double disced as deep as the disc will run, so as to thoroughly cut up the manure

and loosen up the soil. By doing this the small particles of manure are evenly spread through the soil, thus supplying all humus necessary for the proper nourishment of the plants, and also preventing the soil from getting too hard later on, which is one of the greatest causes of failure to get a perfect stand of plants. After a good harrowing to level and break all lumps, a spring tooth harrow is used, being regulated to run nearly as deep as the land was plowed in the fall. After this is completed the soil is usually in a very loose condition, and we immediately harrow to level, break all lumps and conserve moisture. We repeat this spring-toothing once each week until we are ready to plant, so that no weeds are permitted to get a start. For we firmly believe the time to kill weeds is before the plants are set. Before planting we harrow three or four times to thoroughly pulverize and level, and if the season is inclined to be dry at this time, we roll and harrow after the roller with a light harrow. However, if we are having plenty of rain during planting time we do not follow this course. When we have the field in shape to plant it resembles a garden plot.

Time of Planting

We aim to plant the week following May 1st, so that the young plants will get the benefit of the spring rains. However, we have had good results one or two years when we have planted a week or two later.

We use a two-horse strawberry planter to set all our plants and plant about twenty-one inches apart in rows four feet wide. I have personally dropped every plant we have set for the past eight or ten years and have lost comparatively few plants during that time.

We use about one barrel of water for every thousand plants set, and also soak all roots before planting, and as artesian wells and water are very plentiful up in the Sparta district, we do not discriminate in the use of water; be the season wet or dry the water goes in with the plants just the same. We have found that plants set with the planter, and where plenty of water has been used can stand a dry season as well, if not better, than those set by hand, and as a consequence my services at strawberry planting time are in demand, as the neighbors are beginning to become convinced by seeing, that the planter is the surest means of getting a good stand of strawberry plants.

We grow our plants on new land and set the best plant possible to obtain. We cannot afford to take chances and tempt fate and set any other kind of plants. Good plants are the foundation and cheap at any price. We sell many plants, but we advise growers to grow their own, when possible to do so, as we think the plan has many advantages. All plants are set immediately after they are dug and sorted.

If at the time of planting the ground is very dry, (and that is when a planter will work the best) and we do not get rain in a day or two, we again roll the ground with a light roller after the plants are set. This process presses down the ridge in the plant rows and presses the dirt more firm around the plants. We have found that this rolling does not injure the plants in the least, as one would naturally suppose it would, but is a great help in keeping the roots from drying out at this time. It is our aim to have the soil mellow but firm.

Cultivation

As soon as the weeds begin to start, or after the first rain, we take a

light wooden-spike tooth harrow and harrow_w the field lengthwise, if the top of the ground is very hard we also harrow it crosswise. This, we find, breaks up the crust that is bound to form, and kills a large number of the early weeds, and loosens the dirt around the plants, thus saving much hoeing. It also scratches the dirt from the top of the crowns of the plants that have been planted a little too deep, or have been covered by rolling. When doing this great care must be exercised to keep the harrow teeth free from straw, etc. However, one must be on the alert every minute during this harrowing. You will be surprised at the very small number of plants that are injured.

We cultivate our strawberries every week after the first two weeks until September 1st, or later if necessary, and keep the ground in a loose, mellow condition. As soon as the blossoms are out on the new plants, they are all picked off and no berries are permitted to grow the first season, and thus weaken the mother plants. We cultivate as close as possible to the plants without injuring them, and permit no weeds to grow, whatever. We use a sulky cultivator and Planet Junior for this purpose.

After the plants have a good start we hoe them for the first time about June 1st, using great care not to disturb the roots and to uncover all crowns. As soon as the runners start to shoot out, they are trained by cultivating and hoeing to form a matted row, and as the number of runners and new plants increase, the cultivator is narrowed a few inches each time. Care and judgment must be exercised at this time, as the row must be kept intact and not allowed to spread too rapidly.

At the second hoeing the runners are placed and trained to fill all vacant spaces in the row, so that by following this method of gradually allowing the row to grow_w wider, by the first of September we are able to have a good wide row, with a space of from ten to sixteen inches between each row. From this time until it becomes too cold for plants to multiply, we cultivate to prevent the plants from growing together, using for this purpose a spike-tooth cultivator, set as narrow as possible.

Winter Covering

As soon as the ground is frozen we cover it with straw, using two ton per acre. We also cover the old bed with straw or clover hullings, and sometimes have used coarse manure applied with a spreader, which is also a very good covering. When covering, we are very careful to place the cover just thick enough to hide the vines from view. Great care must be exercised not to cover too thick, as it will smother the plants in the spring if left on too long, and also will be too bulky a mass to tread between the rows when they are uncovered.

The covering is left on in the spring as long as the growth of vines will permit without injury to them; the weather decides the time. A great many of the plants will grow through the straw_w if it has been put on properly. However, we go over every row about the last of April and rake off all surplus straw, and it is placed and tramped in the path between the rows. This acts as a mulch and is very beneficial in case of a dry spell during the picking season.

The past year we had no rain during the picking season, but our berries showed very little effect of the dry spell as they were thoroughly mulched.

The Picking Season

It is at this time that great care and judgment must be used. We have now succeeded in growing an excellent stand of vines and have a fine show for a crop of strawberries. Right at this time many of the growers fail. They are not able to get them picked on time and as a consequence have an inferior grade of fruit to market, the berries being too ripe and soft.

We, however, have been in the "game" too long, and fully realize the **task** we have before us. We are engaging pickers the year round, and when the season starts we are equal to the task of getting them picked and to market in good condition. We pick one-half of the field each day. If we find that we are liable to get behind with the picking, we never wait until that is a stern reality, but get busy and hunt up a few extra pickers that can usually be secured for a few days if we hustle around and find them.

We have a set of rules printed on the tickets for the pickers to follow in regard to picking, etc., and we always employ a field superintendent who does nothing but see that these rules are enforced, and above all things knows that the berries are picked reasonably clean from the vines. If not, they will be too ripe for the next time they are picked. We pack in sixteen quart cases immediately after they are brought to the packing sheds, and do not discriminate between the top and bottom of the cases. They are packed just as they come from the field and are equally as good on the bottom of the case as on the top. We are in the business to stay and therefore aim to satisfy all customers. Berries that are to be shipped should be about three quarters colored, depending on the stage of the season.

In short, we employ every possible means to get the berries to market in good condition, as we know the efficient manager of our "Sparta Produce Exchange," Mr. Kern, cannot get the top price for our fruit unless we have done our part, and he has the class of fruit that the trade demands and will carry safely to distant points.

Care of Bed After Picking

As soon as the crop is harvested the field is mowed and the vines are left on the ground to act as a mulch. NO BURNING FOR US. The machine is set to cut three inches high. The field is also clipped again a month or so later. This time the machine is set to cut five inches high.

Soon after the first mowing, we use a spring-tooth sulky cultivator, which is regulated by taking the inside and outside teeth off from each gang. The gangs are made rigid by fastening a two-by-four between them at the proper place. This makes the center of the teeth about four feet wide. It leaves the old row about three feet wide. We have tried all kinds of tools with which to do this work, and so far have found nothing that even commences to equal it. The continual spring of the teeth appears to clear them from vines, mulch, etc, that all other cultivators we have tried will collect. After cultivation, we level with an iron harrow the way the rows run, the harrow let down flat.

This is all the labor we put on the old bed. No hand work is done in any manner. We have tried out many different plans in caring for the old bed, but have found that from a financial standpoint, this plan gets the money, and that is what we are after.

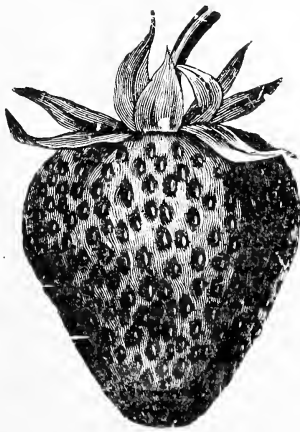
Varieties

Now, before I close, I will say a few words in regard to varieties. We have fruited about all varieties in trial beds. Our main crop is produced from Warfield, Dunlap and Pocomoke. The Warfield has been our old "stand-by" and we stick to it. About one-half of our total planting is Warfield. Senator Dunlap is good, but does not yield as well as the Warfield. The Pocomoke is fine to look at, but a little inclined to be soft when it reaches the Dakotas. It is also a poor plant producer, but it is a heavy yielder. There is not much foliage and the berries are exposed to the sun, and in hot weather may sun-scald.

We thoroughly try out all new varieties in our plant bed, not one year but several years, before we feel safe to plant them in our regular field. At the present time we have some ten or more varieties in our plant bed, testing them out. However, I am not going to recommend any particular varieties, for I believe every section and kind of soil has the berries best adapted to that location. What I have said in regard to varieties, applies to us at Sparta, and possibly may not be the varieties for other sections of the state.

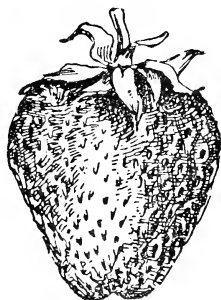
In conclusion, let me say that the growing of strawberries for commercial purposes, on a large scale for profit, requires lots of work and means long hours and some worry during the picking season. If the prospective grower is not willing to accept these conditions, I would advise him to stay out of the business. But if strawberries are looked after in the right manner, there is much pleasure to be derived and profit to be gained.

I am not seeking converts for our plan. I have related to you how we have managed to produce berries, and it is my hope that some person may profit thereby.



GROW STRAWBERRIES FOR PROFIT

GOOD PLANTS ARE THE FOUNDATION



Buy them from someone that makes a success of the business in a commercial way. We offer you the benefit of twenty-five years of experience in the growing of strawberries, and we sell direct from our fields to you.

Our crop, the past season, was nearly Three Thousand, Five Hundred Sixteen-quart cases from nine acres. They sold for nearly Seven Thousand Dollars.

We have the best plants that money can buy; grown on new land; are true to name; free from disease; State Inspection Tag on every shipment. "Our Guarantee"—Money Back if You Are Not Satisfied—If It Is Our Fault.

There is money for you in strawberries if you go after it in the right manner.

Place your orders early. Good plants are scarce, and it now looks as if plants would all be sold before the planting season is half over.

Write for price list and information.

We also have Pedigreed Golden Glow (Wisconsin No. 12) and Silver King (Wisconsin No. 7) Seed Corn, picked before frost, fire dried and tested. Improve and increase your yield of corn.

J. W. LEVERICH & SON

Farmer Strawberry Growers
Sparta, Wisconsin